

Essay Exams

Essay exams are designed to test your ability to synthesise information and to organise your thoughts on paper. The following points are designed to help you prepare for essay style examinations.

Be familiar with the terminology used in essay exam questions

* See *The Learning Centre guide 'Exam Skills: Clue Words'*.

Make sure you understand the question and are clear about what you are being asked to do. Terms like 'compare', 'trace', 'illustrate' and 'evaluate' all have different meanings and will require a different style of answer.

Take time to read the exam paper thoroughly

Make sure you read each question carefully and be sure you understand exactly what the question is asking. A common mistake made in essay exams is not reading the question properly.

If the question is ambiguous . . .

If the question is ambiguous, unclear or too broad, clearly write your interpretation of the question before answering.

Write an essay plan

Before you begin writing, jot down all your ideas and organise them into an essay plan. Don't write your essay off the top of your head—it will end up disorganised and incoherent. First draw up a plan. You can do this on the exam paper itself, or on any spare paper you have with you. Begin by thinking about how you will answer the question. Jot down the main information in point form. Doing this will also help you think about your answer.

Before the Exam

- Make sure you know the time, place and materials required for the exam.
- Arrive with enough time to find your seat and make yourself comfortable.
- Try to stay calm and alert.
- Avoid conversations with other students about how little study you may have done or how panicky you are feeling.

If you have to write more than one essay, always indicate the number of the essay

You don't have to answer questions in the order in which they appear in the exam paper. Start with the easiest one first and do the hardest last. This approach reduces anxiety and can facilitate clear thinking. However, write the essay question number at the top.

Make sure you time yourself on each question

Another common mistake made in essay exams is running out of time. Allocate time for each question. If you need to write two essays in two hours, then allocate 1 hour per question. Start with the easiest one first and do the hardest last. This approach reduces anxiety and helps you think more clearly.

Always give your answer in the first sentence

A good technique is to use the wording of the question in your answer. For example:

"How do the goals of liberal and socialist feminism differ?"

You could begin your essay with:

"The goals of liberal and socialist feminism differ in three main ways . . ."

This approach makes sure you answer the question, and makes the exam easier to mark.

Make sure you structure your essay

You should include:

- **An Introduction**

An introduction should explicitly state your answer and the organisation of the essay. For example:

"The goals of liberal and socialist feminism differ in three main ways. The first is that . . . , The second is . . . and the third main area of difference lies in the . . . This essay will argue that although these differences exist in approaches, the practices of liberal and socialist feminism have become very similar".

- **The Body**

The Body of your essay should include supporting material and appropriate details for your answer. Make sure you structure the body of the essay as you indicated in your introduction. Use transitions to tie your ideas together. This will make your essay flow. If you feel you are losing the plot, go back and reread the question and your introduction.

- **The Conclusion**

In your Conclusion, re-answer the question and refer briefly to the main points in the body. Show HOW you have answered the question. For example:

"In conclusion, it is clear that although liberal and socialist feminism originally held differing views on how to attain their goals, a realistic assessment now shows that their practice has become very similar. This is most clearly illustrated by . . . (give your best example and end the essay).

Leave space in between answers in case you have time to add any information you didn't include in your essays.

If you run out of time . . .

Answer in point form. Markers will often give you some marks for this.

Try to write as legibly as possible

Print your answers instead of using cursive writing. Be aware of grammar, spelling and punctuation. If you are using exam booklets, write on every second line.

If you have time at the end of the exam . . .

Proof read your essay for grammatical and spelling errors.
